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Interview with Bonnie Van Fossen

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Fort Hays State University

Bonnie VanFossen

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CHAPTER II

ORAL INTERVIEW OF MRS. BONNIE VANFOSSEN

Sondra: Mrs. VanFossen, when did you start teaching?

Mrs. VanFossen: In 1912.

Sondra: Where was this?

Mrs. VanFossen: District 32, that's six miles south of Greensburg.

Sondra: How old were you when you started?

Mrs. VanFossen: I was eighteen.

Sondra: How many years did you teach in the one-room school?

Mrs. VanFossen: Let's see now. Twenty-seven years, I..., thirty-seven years, I think.

Sondra: What subjects were studied in the school that you taught in?

Mrs. VanFossen: Well, we had everything. Arithmetic and English and writing and spelling and reading and agriculture and civics and physiology.

Sondra: What was the length of the school day and the school year?

Mrs. VanFossen: We generally had school for eight months, and the school started at nine o'clock in the morning. We had a 15 minute recess at ten o'clock. We had school till twelve. Had an hour off for noon. Then we had 15 minutes at three for a recess and dismissed at four o'clock.

Sondra: When did it start? Was it the first part of September?

Mrs. VanFossen: Yes, early in September.

Sondra: Early in September. Did this change any while you were teaching, either the length of the school day or the length of the school year?

Mrs. VanFossen: No, always the same.

Sondra: What teaching methods were used?

Mrs. VanFossen: Just what do you mean by methods?

Sondra: Well, how did you teach some of the subjects that you taught?

Mrs. VanFossen: Well, the children had their textbooks, I would go through and review subjects with them and ask questions. Then we took written tests over our subjects.

Sondra: What teaching aids were made available to you?

Mrs. VanFossen: Well, globe and maps, and that really was about all.

Sondra: Describe a typical school day curriculum. Well, like what did you start with first? What were some of the first subjects you taught?

Mrs. VanFossen: Well, we had usually our reading classes early in the morning. Then arithmetic classes came after that to be finished before noon. Then we had the afternoon for other things. Spelling generally came later in the evening.

Sondra: Were grade level tests taken for promotion purposes?

Mrs. VanFossen: We had to make a certain average in order to go from one grade to another. And in the eighth grade they had to pass a county examination to complete the rural school before they could enter high school.

Sondra: Did the school have a library?

Mrs. VanFossen: Sometimes we had a few little old books but not too many. There was no money provided for that sort of thing.

Sondra: How did you decide on a textbook? Or did you decide on one?

Mrs. VanFossen: No, those were furnished. The state decided what textbooks we'd use.

Sondra: What was the atmosphere of your school? Like was it strict or was it fairly easy going?

Mrs. VanFossen: Well, in my school we were all a bunch of friends. We just had a good time together, and there was no problem. The children were helpful with each other. We'd always help one another anytime. We all studied together, and we played together and really enjoyed the day.

Sondra: What were some rules of the school?

Mrs. VanFossen: I didn't make rules. I just explained to the children what I wanted and why. And they cooperated.

Sondra: What were some special observances of your school? Did you have any Christmas programs, spelling bees, music contests, or anything?

Mrs. VanFossen: We always had programs at Christmas time and the end of school and a last day dinner. That was about the extent, unless we had a pie supper or a box supper in the evening in order to raise some money to buy some supplies. Those were very successful. Then we put on a big program.

Sondra: Did the school have graduation exercises for the eighth grade?

Mrs. VanFossen: No, they didn't have. They had them in town until that one last year, but that was the end of it.

Sondra: What was the usual age that a child would begin school?

Mrs. VanFossen: Six years old.

Sondra: Did this vary any?

Mrs. VanFossen: No. Unless..., no, we never started them before they were six.

Sondra: Did any start after six for one reason or another that you can remember?

Mrs. VanFossen: No, I didn't have anybody to start after that. They all started right on....

Sondra: Did many children move in and out of the school during a year?

Mrs. VanFossen: Not too many because most of them were from established farms.

Sondra: What was the greatest distance traveled by any student, and what type of transportation did they use?

Mrs. VanFossen: Many of them walked. Some of them drove a horse to a buggy. Some of them rode horseback. And then sometimes two and a half miles.

Sondra: How did most of the students get to the school?

Mrs. VanFossen: Most of them walked.

Sondra: How many students went to school in a typical school year?

Mrs. VanFossen: Well, I've had all the way from five to eighteen.

Sondra: What grade levels did you teach?

Mrs. VanFossen: When I had the eighteen, I had all eight grades. (Laughed)

Sondra: Did the students of this particular school come from a particular cultural background? What nationality might they have been?

Mrs. VanFossen: No, it was mixed.

Sondra: What was the average number of years a student

spent in school?

Mrs. VanFossen: Well, they took in eight years to get through the grades.

Sondra: Did most of them go the total?

Mrs. VanFossen: Most of them finished. Mm-hmm.

Sondra: Were there any outstanding students from your school that later went on to do something significant?

Mrs. VanFossen: Yes, I've had a good many that I've followed through the years, and some of them have done real well. I'm real proud of them.

Sondra: What was the dress and overall appearance of the students?

Mrs. VanFossen: A good many of them wore jeans. Others wore just little cotton dresses. And the boys all with overalls. We liked it that way because we could all play and not have any trouble with clothes.

Sondra: Did the girls wear jeans at any time?

Mrs. VanFossen: Yes, a good many of them wore jeans.

Sondra: What was the cost of education to the student and his family? Was there any charge?

Mrs. VanFossen: No charge.

Sondra: What was the strangest thing that happened while you were teaching?

Mrs. VanFossen: Well, I think one of the most unusual was the time we had a blizzard. The cowboys from the ranch came to the door and wanted to know if they could bring the baby calves in and dry them by the stove. So they brought in straw and brought in the little calves. When they were dry, they would take them back out and bring in more. Really, it wasn't conducive to school work, but

we're proud that we didn't lose a calf.

Sondra: You probably had many amusing moments in your teaching career. Do any of them stand out in your mind?

Mrs. VanFossen: Well, I used to ride horseback, and I had one boy that rode a mule. I would race him. I could win from all the horses in the district, but that one mule I never could beat. (Laughed)

Sondra: Any others?

Mrs. VanFossen: Well, we have gone out at noon and chased coyotes. One time we had a skunk. And I was able to shoot that. So we got rid of him.

Sondra: Oh, so you had a gun?

Mrs. VanFossen: I carried a gun. And I carried a quirt on my horse.

Sondra: Did you ever use it?

Mrs. VanFossen: Yes, one time a man had stayed all night at the schoolhouse, and he grabbed my bridle and demanded that I dismount. I let him have it across the face with my quirt, and it didn't take him long to leave school. (Laughed)

Sondra: Describe a typical day before and after school. What did you do before school, and what did you have to do after?

Mrs. VanFossen: Well, I got there early in the morning. First thing to do was to build a good hot fire providing I'd brought in coal and kindling or cobs from the far corner, which might be an acre of ground, the night before. Build the fire and take out the ashes. Then sweep and dust. And, by the way, go out and clean the johns in the far corners of the school ground everyday. Then we had to see that the erasers were cleaned and dusted. Then I had to get in fresh water for the water buckets and the wash pans and so forth. And by the time I got all of that done, the children were coming. Then it was time

to go out and play a little while before school started if the weather was nice. If not, we'd play pussy wants a corner in the house until nine o'clock, and then school started as usual.

Sondra: Then after school, what did you do?

Mrs. VanFossen: Any chores that had to be taken care of were done. Tried to sweep at night and get that over with. And generally it was to see that the children got home, and then I would start either the car or horseback or however I went.

Sondra: How were teachers expected to conduct themselves in the community? What restrictions or anything of this type did you...?

Mrs. VanFossen: Well, they expected the teacher to be a model for the children. Our state superintendent at that time was Miss Wooster and very strict. She said if any teacher ever went to a dance, she would have her certificate annulled.

Sondra: Any other requirements put on you?

Mrs. VanFossen: Nothing in particular. I never had any trouble with that. People were always very cooperative with me.

Sondra: Could teachers marry and still teach at this time?

Mrs. VanFossen: In some schools they could.

Sondra: Were you married at the time that...?

Mrs. VanFossen: No, not at the time I started, but I was before I finished.

Sondra: Were you in charge of any extracurricular activities? Did you have any clubs or anything that you had the students participate in other than during school hours?

Mrs. VanFossen: No.

Sondra: Was there a problem of teacher turnover in the one-room schools?

Mrs. VanFossen: No, usually there were plenty of teachers that wanted the schools. If you could stay another year in your own district, that was better. Then unless you were dissatisfied in some way, and I never was. I stayed, I think, one school I stayed eight years in.

Sondra: Did more than one teacher ever work in any of the schools you taught in?

Mrs. VanFossen: No, I never taught with a double teacher.

Sondra: Was there a principal for the school?

Mrs. VanFossen: No. Just the county superintendent.

Sondra: Did the county superintendent visit you?

Mrs. VanFossen: Yes, she visited at least once and usually twice through the year.

Sondra: Was there an evaluation system used for teachers? Is that what maybe the county superintendent was doing? Was she evaluating you?

Mrs. VanFossen: Well, yes, in a way. She was sort of testing the children too, to see if they were being taught the things they should be taught.

Sondra: How were discipline problems with the children handled?

Mrs. VanFossen: Well, some teachers had trouble. I didn't because I explained to the children what I wanted and why I wanted it. And generally they were quite cooperative. If they weren't, I handled that in just a few minutes.

Sondra: Did you have any particular thing that you had them do if they were not cooperative?

Mrs. VanFossen: No..., no.

Sondra: Just depended on the child?

Mrs. VanFossen: Just depended.

Sondra: Did you know of any men teachers who taught?

Mrs. VanFossen: Yes, there were a few. I remember Albert Hodges taught in a country school for awhile. Well, there were several that taught in the beginning, but they didn't stay with it long like the others did.

Sondra: Do you think they handled their discipline any differently than you did?

Mrs. VanFossen: Well, I'm sure I don't know what.... I don't know how they managed.

Sondra: Where did you live while teaching at the school?

Mrs. VanFossen: I lived in town.

Sondra: Did you have to stay with anybody before you were married?

Mrs. VanFossen: No, I rode horseback.

Sondra: But you had your own house in town?

Mrs. VanFossen: Oh, in town? Yes, I lived at home.

Sondra: Oh, you lived with your parents at that time.

Mrs. VanFossen: Mm-hmm. When I started.

Sondra: How much schooling did you have in order to teach?

Mrs. VanFossen: Just through high school and two years of college.

Sondra: You had two years of college before you started teaching? Or did you get that...?

Mrs. VanFossen: I made part of it afterwards. Summer school and so forth.

Sondra: How was it decided which children went to your school?

Mrs. VanFossen: Everybody in the district would go to the same school.

Sondra: Was the schoolhouse used for community, social activities as well as for education?

Mrs. VanFossen: Yes, it was a boarding place, and they used it for all kinds of entertainment. And for, well.... (Shuffled papers) Debates, literary society, church, Sunday school, spelling matches, and box suppers. They had church and Sunday school in most of them. Some of them didn't.

Sondra: Did they have the spelling bees, like, at a box supper?

Mrs. VanFossen: Yes. Sometimes they did that.

Sondra: That's when they did that.

Mrs. VanFossen: And arithmetic matches.

Sondra: Oh? Were there any traditions that were particular to your school that, maybe, some of the other schools didn't do?

Mrs. VanFossen: Well, we always had a contest in the spring and a parade. We made floats, and they gave prizes for the best floats.

Sondra: Then the parade was in town?

Mrs. VanFossen: Mm-hmm, yes.

Sondra: Was there a school board for your school?

Mrs. VanFossen: Yes, three members.

Sondra: What were their duties?

Mrs. VanFossen: Well, they were to see that the building was kept up and to see that there was fuel supplies on hand at all times. And they paid the teacher. Sometimes they came and asked if

there was anything we needed, and sometimes they just waited for the teacher to ask for what she wanted.

Sondra: Do you remember any school board members' names?

Mrs. VanFossen: Yes. I can remember of various places. There were Parkins and Peters and Logans and Phillips and....

Sondra: Did your school have any organization similar to a PTA?

Mrs. VanFossen: No.

Sondra: The parents were not involved?

Mrs. VanFossen: No, not in any way.

Sondra: Who hired and fired the teachers?

Mrs. VanFossen: The school board.

Sondra: Did anyone else have any input into that decision of hiring someone or firing them?

Mrs. VanFossen: I don't think so unless there was some trouble. Then they might go to the board with it.

Sondra: Did any activities take place between a school that was near yours? Did the two schools do anything together?

Mrs. VanFossen: Once in awhile we'd join with another district and have spelling matches or arithmetic matches.

Sondra: Did any school close while you were the teacher? Of any of the one-room schools, did any of them close when you were there?

Mrs. VanFossen: There was one I taught my last term. The school closed in that district that last term. That was the end of the country schools in the county. That was where? (Looking through

papers.) Thirty-six, eleven. That was District 11. It closed in, I think, in '39.

Sondra: When was the schoolhouse built that you first taught in?

Mrs. VanFossen: I don't know.

Sondra: Do you know by whom it was built?

Mrs. VanFossen: No.

Sondra: Like was it the community?

Mrs. VanFossen: I have no idea.

Sondra: OK. What materials were used to build the schoolhouse?

Mrs. VanFossen: Lumber and cement blocks.

Sondra: Do you know where the materials came from?

Mrs. VanFossen: Well, just right from town.

Sondra: Was the land purchased or given to the school?

Mrs. VanFossen: It was generally, you might say, on loan as long as the schoolhouse was there. Then it reverted to the owner.

Sondra: Where did the funds for the construction of the school come from? Do you know?

Mrs. VanFossen: Came from taxes.

Sondra: Did the community help finance the construction? Other than taxes?

Mrs. VanFossen: I don't think so.

Sondra: What type of heating, lighting and toilets did you have?

Mrs. VanFossen: We had outside toilets. One in each corner of the schoolground which had to be cleaned and taken care of everyday. We had a big,

round stove in one corner of the room where you had to carry in your coal and cobs to build your fire. And for lighting we had none. Except in one schoolhouse when, I remember, when we stayed overnight through a blizzard. We had a little light there that a neighbor brought in. The children all went to bed about eleven o'clock around on the seats, and I'd get up and tiptoe around to see if they were covered with their jackets. It was alright until a board went squeak-squawk and then every little kid popped up, and we had it all to do over again. (Laughed)

Sondra: So there was no lighting other than the outside light?

Mrs. VanFossen: No.

Sondra: What did you do during a storm or when it got cloudy?

Mrs. VanFossen: If it were during the schooldays, we went ahead and had school. Unless it became real severe, then sometimes we'd sing to kind of quiet things down a little bit.

Sondra: How did the school get its water?

Mrs. VanFossen: Well, sometimes you brought it from home in a jug. Sometimes you pumped it. If there was a pump on the place, you pumped it by hand.

Sondra: Then that was one of your jobs also to bring water or to see that there was water in the schoolhouse?

Mrs. VanFossen: Yes, mm-hmm.

Sondra: Describe the interior of the school.

Mrs. VanFossen: Well, the ceilings were generally high, plastered walls. A blackboard on probably two or three sides. Large windows on two sides of the room. It wasn't too attractive. It was usable. Sometimes the walls, if painted, were painted green.

Sondra: Where did the students put their coats or their things?

Mrs. VanFossen: Usually a little cloakroom in the back for their lunch pails and their coats. If not, we had a bench at the back of the room.

Sondra: What type of lunches did they bring?

Mrs. VanFossen: Well, most of them brought sandwiches and hardboiled eggs, sometimes cake. And always they wanted to swap a little piece with the teacher. (Laughed)

Sondra: Were they always cold lunches?

Mrs. VanFossen: Yes, until we got the commodities, and then we cooked lunches at school. They furnished the gruel or whatever. And the teacher cooked the lunch at school. Sometimes we made pancakes, and sometimes we had cereal. But it was really nice to have a good hot meal at noon.

Sondra: Now, you said something about the commodities. Did the children always bring those or were you given those?

Mrs. VanFossen: No, the county furnished them. I would take them to the school, and then I became the cook and dishwasher as well as teacher. (Laughed)

Sondra: They had plates at school then, left there at school?

Mrs. VanFossen: We each one brought one from home; so we had something to eat from. After dinner was over, everybody had to wash their plates and their knife and fork and put them away for tomorrow.

Sondra: About what year did you start getting the commodities? Do you remember?

Mrs. VanFossen: Along the latter years. We didn't have them for a long time. There was one school where the children didn't have much in their

dinner buckets, so I gave them my lunch each day. I could do without.

Sondra: Oh, you did? Was that during a particular era, a particular time when they didn't have much?

Mrs. VanFossen: Just that one district.

Sondra: It was a poor district?

Mrs. VanFossen: Mm-hmm.

Sondra: Who was in charge of the upkeep of the building? The repairs?

Mrs. VanFossen: The teacher took care of it until it had to have repairs. Then some member of the school board took care of it.

Sondra: Were there any physical problems with the building? In the construction? Was it large enough? Were there times when it was too small?

Mrs. VanFossen: No.

Sondra: Did it leak? Ever leak or anything?

Mrs. VanFossen: No, no, we never had any trouble like that. One time a tornado destroyed a building. The carpenter built it back. It was late in the season. We were three weeks late, so they decided to start school anyhow. We didn't have any furniture, so the children sat on the floor. And we started school. They sat that way for a couple of weeks before they got the furniture. But we had school anyhow. I sat on on the floor too, and it was awfully fun. (Laughed)

Sondra: What did they write on when they didn't have desks?

Mrs. VanFossen: We put a board across their knees or across their laps and....

Sondra: What types of things did they bring from

home to use at school? Did they bring anything?
Pencils?

Mrs. VanFossen: They brought pencils and sometimes
erasers. And that's about all.

Sondra: No paper?

Mrs. VanFossen: Sometimes they'd have tablets.

Sondra: Did you have slates at school?

Mrs. VanFossen: In the very first schools I had
slates?

Sondra: Blackboards?

Mrs. VanFossen: Blackboards. Mm-hmm.

Sondra: Did the students use the blackboards?

Mrs. VanFossen: Oh, yes. We worked arithmetic on the
blackboard almost always. Then, of course, all
the examination questions were written on the
board, so the children could take them from
that. And we practiced our writing on the board.
It was used very much.

Sondra: What were the blackboards made of?

Mrs. VanFossen: Some of them were slate boards, which
were the nice boards. Others were painted right
on the wall with black paint, the chalktray
underneath. You had to wash the boards every day
or two to have them nice and clean. We had white
chalk to use on the blackboards.

Sondra: What was the approximate size of the
schoolroom?

Mrs. VanFossen: Ordinarily around 30 X 36.

Sondra: Was there a platform for the teacher?

Mrs. VanFossen: Some of the schools had a platform,
and always the teacher's desk was on the
platform. Others had no platform and was just a

regular floor.

Sondra: What happened to the schoolhouse that you taught in?

Mrs. VanFossen: A tornado destroyed it. It was a little unusual. There wasn't a cement block left of the building, but the pump with the tin cup over the pump rod still hung there.

Sondra: Did they build a school right back in the same place?

Mrs. VanFossen: They rebuilt in the same place, and that's when we sat on the floor.

Sondra: When they no longer needed that one-room school, what happened to it?

Mrs. VanFossen: Well, three of the schools were brought into town and made into houses. This one over here on the corner is one of them. Others of them have been torn down and moved away. Sometimes a farmer bought one and remodeled it for for a granary and so forth. I don't think there are any left in the country now.

Sondra: Do you know what happened to the equipment in the school or the desks when it closed?

Mrs. VanFossen: Sometimes they had a sale and disposed of them.

Sondra: What was your salary when you first started teaching?

Mrs. VanFossen: My first term was fifty dollars.

Sondra: A month?

Mrs. VanFossen: Mm-hmm.

Sondra: Do you remember the last year you taught?

Mrs. VanFossen: A hundred and twenty-five the last year. The last few years.

Sondra: How was your salary determined? Who decided how much you would get?

Mrs. VanFossen: The school board decided.

Sondra: Did all the districts stay pretty much the same?

Mrs. VanFossen: Pretty well the same. Mm-hmm.

Sondra: Did you have a voice in the salary decisions?

Mrs. VanFossen: Yes, I discussed it with the board. And we would come to an agreement.

Sondra: Was this talked over every year? Did you bring it up; did they bring it up?

Mrs. VanFossen: Usually it just went on from year to year. Once in awhile I might ask for a raise, and usually they gave it to me.

Sondra: How did you get your paychecks?

Mrs. VanFossen: One member of the school board would hand it to me.

Sondra: Was it a certain time of the month; was it always the same time?

Mrs. VanFossen: No, sometimes I waited the entire year.

Sondra: And got the whole salary?

Mrs. VanFossen: And got the whole salary in one check.

Sondra: Was that determined ahead of time that this is how it would be done?

Mrs. VanFossen: No, just whenever I needed my check, they'd send it to me. If I didn't need it, why, we'd let it ride.

Sondra: Is there anything else that you'd like to add

about the one-room school?

Mrs. VanFossen: Well, I thought of something kind of funny that you might like to hear. One time I was going over the Revolutionary War with my eighth grade. We had a family of English people in the school. This little Johnny Boy became very interested in the story about England. He slipped up and sat by me while we talked and didn't say a word till it was all over. Then he said, "Who won?" And I said, "We did." He says, "God, my dad's going to be mad when he finds this out!" (Laughed)

Sondra: That is an interesting story. Do you have anything else that you want to tell about the one-room schoolhouse?

Mrs. VanFossen: Well, I used to ride a pony to school and the highlight of the day was the time that I took her baby colt with me to the school. We didn't get much done that day, but the colt got lots of petting. (Laughed) And there were times when I had to ride in a blizzard across the fields to get to school. One time a farmer came to see if I'd made it because of the bad storm.

Sondra: Did you always have school, no matter what?

Mrs. VanFossen: We very seldom dismissed. There was a time in February when we planned to have a Valentine Party, and we woke up that morning to six foot drifts. So we couldn't have school. It was about two weeks before we really got to have our party. However, when we did get to start back to school, one of the boys took a team and a wagon. And I went with him. Then we got down in a drift and one of the horses fell and came up on the other side of the tongue. There we had both horses on one side. Leonard and I were both soaking wet by the time we got that straightened out. (Laughed) Then one time there was a lady who called me and ask me if I was afraid of the flu. I said, "No." And she said, "Well, my son is sick in bed, and I can't take his temperature for he bites the thermometer. Would you come and see if you could do it?" So I stayed nights with

them for two weeks to take care of him and also the mother when she got sick. And taught school in the daytime and took care of two little girls at night to keep them away from the flu. So things like that happened once in awhile.

Sondra: If school was called off because of a storm, did you go longer in the spring and make it up?

Mrs. VanFossen: Yes, we had to make up everyday.

Sondra: Let's go back to the salary decisions. If you wanted a raise in your salary, did you ask the school board to meet or did you just go to a school board meeting and then ask them?

Mrs. VanFossen: I just went to one member of the school board, and he took it up with the others.

Sondra: OK. Is there anything else you would like to add about your salary or your discussions with the school board?

Mrs. VanFossen: Well, when they had their other meetings at the school, if there was a box supper or a cake walk, the money that was raised was used for supplies that were not furnished by the district. There were contests and parades for prizes, offered for the best floats and also for contest winners in spelling and arithmetic.

Sondra: Did the school board provide the prizes? Or did you have to come up with the prizes for...?

Mrs. VanFossen: The school board provided them.

Sondra: OK. You said you just talked with a school board member about an increase in salary. You never did talk to the whole board itself, going before them and ask for...?

Mrs. VanFossen: Usually one member took care of it.

Sondra: You just talked...?

Mrs. VanFossen: He discussed it with the other

members.

Sondra: Did you tell them that you wanted a certain amount? Or you just said I would like to have a raise, and then they took it up?

Mrs. VanFossen: Yes. Usually that, it sounded a little better than a set amount.

Sondra: Did you make any others demands from the school board?

Mrs. VanFossen: Oh, once in awhile I had to ask for cobs or kindling to build my fires. Then they had to get coal, of course. But, it was a little difficult getting something to start with like kindling.

Sondra: So if you had a problem with the school, you just went to one of the school board members after school and discussed it.

Mrs. VanFossen: Yes, they generally took care of it pretty well.

Sondra: Ok. Let's talk about your certificate, your teaching certificate. How did you get it?

Mrs. VanFossen: We had to go to normal school for a month, usually in August. Then we had two days of examination. We had to take 17 subjects in order to get a certificate to teach. And we had to make an average of 90, or you wouldn't get your certificate.

Sondra: Where did you go to normal school?

Mrs. VanFossen: In Greensburg.

Sondra: In Greensburg?

Mrs. VanFossen: We had a month of school with those teachers here, and you went everyday including Saturday and sometimes nights to complete your work to get ready for your test.

Sondra: So this was a special schooling that was

offered right here in Greensburg for all the one-room school teachers.

Mrs. VanFossen: Yes, for the teachers. Mm-hmm.

Sondra: Was it held in Greensburg because Greensburg is the county seat?

Mrs. VanFossen: Yes, mm-hmm. At one time, I remember, we had six teachers from other towns boarding with my family to go to normal school. We'd come home late in the afternoon, hot, and get your clothes changed and maybe ride a horse. (Laughed)

Sondra: So you went to school for about a month, and then you took your test immediately at the end of the school?

Mrs. VanFossen: At the end of the normal school. Mm-hmm.

Sondra: Then how long was it before you got your certificate?

Mrs. VanFossen: About ten days.

Sondra: Did your class go on any field trips when you taught?

Mrs. VanFossen: Yes, my school had a good many field trips. We had an especially good time when we visited the Kansas Exhibition Train. They displayed all the Kansas products. We even had a chance to hold a pet skunk. We didn't trust him, but we held him.

Sondra: Where did you go to see this train?

Mrs. VanFossen: It was in Greensburg. I brought the students in. Then we went to Alabaster Cave and a visit to the Pratt broadcasting station, a trip to Elm Mills (a park south of Pratt), a tour of the Kiowa County Courthouse. The children were really frightened when they were locked in the jail. They were quite sure they were never going to do anything where they'd get locked up.

Sondra: How did you get to Pratt and the caverns? Did you have a bus?

Mrs. VanFossen: We went by car.

Sondra: Who provided the cars?

Mrs. VanFossen: We did. And took the children to Pratt and then rode the train from Pratt to Greensburg. The engineer was real nice; he took the little ones up to the cab and explained it. They really had a good time. Some of them have never been on a train since.

Sondra: When you said, we did, you mean the teachers in the county or you and your husband, or you and the parents?

Mrs. VanFossen: Yes, yes, my husband and I with our children, with our own school. It was the only school that got to ride a train. (Laughed)

Sondra: What did you do at recess? What was a typical recess like?

Mrs. VanFossen: Oh, if it was nice weather, we went out and played dare base or baseball or hide and seek or kick the can or steal sticks. Any number of outdoor games. Remember we only had 15 minutes to do it. Blackman and everything. If it was a stormy day, we had all kinds of games in the house to play. We played marbles or dominoes or London Bridge or blindfold or pussy wants a corner or fruit basket or spin the platter. Noon was all too short.

Sondra: How long was it?

Mrs. VanFossen: An hour.

Sondra: One hour.

Mrs. VanFossen: One hour.

Sondra: Did you play with the students or did you grade papers?

Mrs. VanFossen: Oh, yes, always I played with them.
It was lots of fun to catch the teacher.
(Laughed) Van had to put my heels on my shoes with
stove bolts because I ran them off. (Laughed)

Sondra: Trying to run so fast?

Mrs. VanFossen: Mm-hmm.

Sondra: OK. You mentioned a couple of games that I'm
not too familiar with. Steal sticks?

Mrs. VanFossen: Mm-hmm.

Sondra: How do you play that?

Mrs. VanFossen: You divided up, an equal number on
sides, and you had a pile of six sticks at the far
end of your base. Then you had a dividing line in
the middle. You had to try to run and steal a
stick, and get back and put it on your base.
Whoever got all the sticks on one base won. But,
of course, you could be caught, and put on a base
as prisoner. Then the members had to run and free
the prisoner. And that was a good game.

Sondra: Are there any other games that you mentioned
that you would like to tell about because, maybe,
I wouldn't know how they were played?

Mrs. VanFossen: Well, of course, you know how we
played hide and seek. We played run, sheep, run,
and we played....

Sondra: What about dare base?

Mrs. VanFossen: Dare base?

Sondra: Is that what you said, dare base?

Mrs. VanFossen: Yes. There you had a base and another
runner leaving the base after the opposing runner
could protect you. Otherwise, you'd be caught.
It was really a lot of fun, and the children played
dare base a good deal of the time. Sometimes
they'd keep the same sides for days. And
sometimes they'd re-choose. If a student decided

he didn't want to play after he'd been chosen and played part of the game, he had to play to finish that game. Then he could go and sit on the porch. But if he was put on the porch for punishment, he could not play the next game.

Sondra: So, like, he'd stay....

Mrs. VanFossen: We had to be good sports. You couldn't say kings X if you fell down. You had to take it.

Sondra: Did you ever have any students that did something where you kept them in from recess or made them stay on the porch?

Mrs. VanFossen: Yes, sometimes. Sometimes that happened.

Sondra: That was used as a punishment then, as it is now.

Mrs. VanFossen: Mm-hmm. Yes. There have been times when I had to use a little paddle.

Sondra: What kinds of things did they do to lose a recess?

Mrs. VanFossen: Well.

Sondra: Or get a paddling?

Mrs. VanFossen: I remember one time when two of them didn't come in when I rang the bell for recess. It seemed that the year before they had climbed the fence, and the teacher had chased them. So they thought they'd get me to do it. And I didn't do it. I waited until the next morning when they came back to school and blistered them both.

Sondra: Did you play out in the snow?

Mrs. VanFossen: Yes, we made snowmen, and we played fox and goose. That was always a lot of fun. We played that until we tramped the snow out. But we didn't snowball each other. That was a little dangerous.

Sondra: Which game did you say was the most popular or which would you say was the most popular recess game?

Mrs. VanFossen: I think dare base probably was the most popular game.

Sondra: Did you play baseball? Or did you have any equipment like that where you could play baseball or football?

Mrs. VanFossen: Yes, we played baseball.

Sondra: Did the children bring...?

Mrs. VanFossen: Yes, the children brought their own bats and balls.

Sondra: Anything that you needed to play a game the children provided then. You didn't have that in your school.

Mrs. VanFossen: No, they didn't furnish it.

Sondra: I would like to know more about teaching eight grades at once. Which class did you teach first?

Mrs. VanFossen: Generally we started the eighth grade first. But you had to just mix them in anyway you could in order to get them all taken care of.

Sondra: So you taught the eighth grade and got them started working on something, and that would allow you some time with the younger ones.

Mrs. VanFossen: Yes.

Sondra: How much time did you spend with the the eighth grade? Or with each class?

Mrs. VanFossen: Well, you tried to divide your day equally so that each grade would have about the same amount of time.

Sondra: Did they stay in their seats or did they

come up to you?

Mrs. VanFossen: Usually, they came to my desk. Be one or two maybe three in a class and that was easier than having them scattered about the room.

Sondra: Did you have a time schedule set for each class then?

Mrs. VanFossen: Yes, we had a time schedule and stayed as well within that as we could.

Sondra: What did the other students do while you taught one particular class?

Mrs. VanFossen: Well, they were preparing their lessons for their classes, and everybody kept busy. Occasionally one of the older ones could help a little one which was good for them.

Sondra: What subjects did the first grade study?

Mrs. VanFossen: They studied reading, writing, arithmetic and spelling.

Sondra: And the second grade?

Mrs. VanFossen: The same, with the addition of English.

Sondra: The third grade? Was there anything else added to their subjects?

Mrs. VanFossen: Geography.

Sondra: Fourth grade?

Mrs. VanFossen: History.

Sondra: They had the same but added history.

Mrs. VanFossen: Mm-hmm.

Sondra: And the fifth grade?

Mrs. VanFossen: That was about it.

Sondra: They did the same as the fourth?

Mrs. VanFossen: Then you go on to the upper grades.
They get their agriculture and civics and....

Sondra: Did you ever have any students much older than
the grade they were supposed to be in? Like, if
they were in the third grade were they 11 or 12?

Mrs. VanFossen: No, we pretty well were where they
belonged.

Sondra: Do you remember any of the names of the
textbooks that you used?

Mrs. Van Fossen: At the moment, I don't recall.

Sondra: Did the parents buy those books?

Mrs. VanFossen: Yes.

Sondra: Did you teach phonics when you taught reading?

Mrs. VanFossen: Everyday. (Laughed)

Sondra: Did the students have homework?

Mrs. VanFossen: Sometimes. If they didn't complete a
certain amount of work at school for the next day,
then they took it home, to help.

Sondra: Then they also were allowed a little bit of
time like, the next morning while you were working
with another class to work on those also?

Mrs. VanFossen: Yes. Mm-hmm.

Sondra: What happened if their homework was not done?

Mrs. VanFossen: Well, once in awhile it had to be done
at recess or noon.

Sondra: What did you do if a student was noisy or
disturbed another student too much when you were
working with another class?

Mrs. VanFossen: Well, I spoke to him quietly, and if
that didn't take care of it, I handled it.

Sondra: Did the parents ever have to be called in for

discipline reasons?

Mrs. VanFossen: No, never.

Sondra: Or for homework, not having homework done or anything?

Mrs. VanFossen: No, I never had any trouble with that.

Sondra: How did you teach penmanship?

Mrs. VanFossen: Well, each child had his own copy book, and we practiced on scratch paper. Then wrote in our copy books.

Sondra: Did all the classes have penmanship?

Mrs. VanFossen: Yes, all the way through.

Sondra: Were students ever absent from school to help their parents?

Mrs. VanFossen: Occasionally.

Sondra: What did you do to catch them up if they had to be gone?

Mrs. VanFossen: Well, if there were others in the class, they had to make up the work.

Sondra: Did you ever have any students that were gone for a long period of time?

Mrs. VanFossen: No. Didn't do much running around in those days. (Laughed)

Sondra: Did you ever do any tutoring outside of class?

Mrs. VanFossen: Yes, I taught summer school several different years.

Sondra: Where was this?

Mrs. VanFossen: In Kiowa County.

Sondra: Was it at the school or...?

Mrs. VanFossen: In the home.

Sondra: You went to the student's home?

Mrs. VanFossen: I went to the student's home. Mm-hmm.
Occasionally I did have a child come to my home.
And I taught them, taught her here.

Sondra: Was this just to get someone caught up who was behind?

Mrs. VanFossen: Yes. Mm-hmm.

Sondra: Did you ever do this if they hadn't passed their test to go on to the next grade? Did you try to get them caught up in the summer?

Mrs. VanFossen: No, I never did that.

Sondra: They just took the grade over?

Mrs. VanFossen: Mm-hmm.

Sondra: Were students more eager to learn the first years you taught than the latter years?

Mrs. VanFossen: No, I can't say that they were. They were always interested in school.

Sondra: Do you have anything else that you would like to add that we might have forgotten?

Mrs. VanFossen: You asked about the discipline. There was a little boy one time making a little racket. I touched him on the shoulder. He didn't stop. I went past and patted him on the back, and he didn't stop. I sat down with him. I said, "Honey, you know I think the world and all of you, but it won't keep me from boxing your ears if you don't straighten up." And he says, "I'm shut."
(Laughed)

Sondra: Well, you certainly have had a lot of experiences in your teaching career, and I thank you for giving me this interview.

Mrs. VanFossen: I've enjoyed every minute of it.